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HOW TO LET GO OF THE WORLD

By: Franny Choi
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This week in the PEN Poetry Series, PEN America features a poem by Franny Choi.

How to Let Go of the World

There's a documentary about climate change called *How to Let Go of the World*, and Sam asks, *Should I jump off a building*.

Among a growing list of promises I can't make my friends: *This weight will tether. You can come back up again*. The faithfulness of gravity, of morning sounds. *If only you'll stay*.

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When I walk into the street it's almost as if it'll last: Smudge of a cooked orange pressed into the sky. The cars follow all their old lineages back and forth from shifts; meanwhile, three teenagers pile rollicking onto the sidewalk.

I don't know how to do it: hold their faces in my hands and tell them what's waiting. How to teach any of us to follow this song, into what dark.

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One evening, I turned a corner and panicked at a sudden flash in my rearview, teeth chattering into my highest throat. Every nerve prepared for the acrid drip of cop talk until I realized: it was no cruiser. It was the sky. The sky, shocked with dying.

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I cried when I saw the photos of bleached reefs. Later, I had to cut the phrase out of every poem: *Bleached reef. Bleached reef.* If a record skips you bend low to greet it. You greet it with a cloth and your own good breath.

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When the Pyrex burst all over the stove, we stood still for a minute to let ourselves be rocked by the sound, the sudden natural disaster of our ruined dinner. To be safe, we turned to the ceiling and asked any spirits present to

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tuck themselves back into the drywall. Then went for bags and brooms, picked out the shards, the ghost-knives hiding in the tiles for our heels.

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I should mention that my first love left Earth from a rooftop, though he didn't jump. Or: he jumped only the way muscles do, on their way to sleep.

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I can watch the videos of brimstone eating California. I can listen to the sound of a boy describe how holding a line against fire might cut time off his sentence. I can hold his voice in my hands and whisper straight into it, but that doesn't make him here. I can love and love his arms helping mine make something other than dirt and watch that love bleed straight into the space between us and then of course. It falls. Into a tunnel and gone.

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You can come back up again. Run, and the sky will catch you in its thousand orange hands. You'll never land.

: : :

I stalk the house swatting the flies, thirsty for the sound of newspaper on exoskeleton, the satisfaction of a clean and bloody ending.

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When they're gone, I almost miss them. *They fly out of my arms. I fly out of their arms.*

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What's the German word for preemptively missing something so much you can't look at it. Literal translation: *green green green and I hide my face.*

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In Flint I turn on the tap and out comes war wrapped in putrid cellophane. In Detroit I flip the switch and boil war for tea. In Providence I over-war the plants. War runs down my face in the theater's dark. I wade into a blanket of war and let its waves carry me out, out past the shoreline's certainty.

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In other words: I beach myself.

Other words: I leech bleakly. Breathe sleet, a wreath of it. I flinch at the leaves, anticipating their reek, the graves of reefs. I bleach and bleach and watch the chlorine slip clean from my teeth.

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I want to tether my friends to the rooftop railing the way we once pinned a blanket to the beach with shoes, books, bags of carrots, wine in a can. How we flexed and curled our toes until we found the damper sand, the soft homes of crabs below. But the wind won't stop coming. Orange and exoskeleton against our little shore.

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If only it'd been a ghost that had shattered the glass. Some simple anger—some old fable we could soothe back to sleep with a few choice words and a handful of incense. Much worse that it was the heat. Much worse: the way molecules bend to the fact of it, and break.

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I listened to those firefighters while, in Hamtramck, I waged a much tinier war against the dust on my blinds. I wiped and wiped to rid my windows of it. In the forest, rot feeds. The earth drinks soot and makes it into new leaves. In other words it's the plastic, here, that makes dirt a problem.

I bent low to greet it, dipped a cloth in water to approximate a tongue. Meanwhile, the light through the slats shocked my image into slices.

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When disaster comes, some of us will stand on the rooftop to address the ghosts. Some of us will hold the line. Some will look for the shards, run our tongues along the floor.

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I say *when* like disaster hasn't come, isn't already growing in the yard. Do I have to run through the list? The firefighter prisoners—my friends' islands slowly swallowed—war in my faucet, remember? Syria is the name of a drought. The name of this hurricane is Exxon, *Exxon*, I shout. I can pull as many weeds as I want. I stalk the garden pulling them, thirsty for the sound of their true names wrenching out of the soil. (Do I have to say it? They fly out of my arms.)

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I should mention that when my first love died, I already had a stack of poems about missing him. I want to say this prepped me for widowhood—widowhood to the world, et cetera.

The truth: under the topmost sand is another, darker layer, damp from the ocean's closeness. There were days I begged to be buried in it—cool, mutable grave, reprieve from the unrelenting sun—sun—sun—

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Among a growing list of other things that are unrelenting: teenagers piling rollicking into the street. The shock of a citrus sky in midwinter. The way a phrase's shape can hook itself through your lip for weeks. Once Sam walked around a whole day muttering, *Soul, I say!* and he did, and did.

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In lieu of a proper translation for my grief, I say, *green green green,* until it cools enough to lower myself into.

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Holding my love's face in my hands, I tell him I miss him. I say, *I miss you like I miss the trees.*

By this I mean, *Look! The trees are here! Everyone's outside, darling: green in my hands, ghosts in the drywall —everyone's waiting for us.*

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I should mention that when my first love died, he was already dead, had already always been on his way to the roof, on his way over its edge. And when he was here, he was here. By this logic, he is and was and is and was. Unrelentingly.

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In lieu of proximity to firefighters; in lieu of the ability to speak the airlesss language of ghosts; or to reverse the logic of molecules; or to force Exxon to call the hurricane by its rightful name; or to convince my friends not to launch themselves from the rooftops of every false promise made by every rotten idol; in lieu of all I can't do or undo; I hold. The faces of the trees in my hands. I miss them. And miss and miss them. Until I fly out of grief's arms, and the sky. Catches me in its thousand orange hands. It catches me, and I stay there. Suspended against the unrelenting orange. I stay there splayed, and dying. And shocking the siren sky.

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**This poem includes lines borrowed from Bhanu Kapil, Martin Espada, and Laura Brown-Lavoie*

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